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TESTIMONY AND EMPIRICISM:

JOHN SERGEANT, JOHN LOCKE, AND THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF TRUTH

John Henry

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If John Sergeant (1623-1707) is remembered at all today, it is perhaps as a Catholic controversialist who took issue with better known Anglican divines such as John Bramhall, Jeremy Taylor, Henry Hammond, Meric Casaubon, John Tillotson, and Edward Stillingfleet. Others might come across him as a shadowy and somewhat sinister figure who testified to Jesuit involvement in the so-called Popish Plot, while those better informed about the history of English Roman Catholicism in the late seventeenth century, might know him as the last of the Blackloists. That is to say, the last of the followers of Thomas White, or Blacklo (1593-1676), who has been described as ranking alongside John Henry Newman as the most original thinker produced by modern English Catholicism, and the only English theologian worthy to be regarded as a heresiarch.¹

When Sergeant died in 1707 the Catholic preacher-in-ordinary to James II, Sylvester

¹ Aveling J. C. H., *The Handle and the Axe: Catholic Recusants in England from Reformation to Emancipation* (London, 1976), 115; and Hughes P., *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in England* (London: 1942), 398. For a full account of the life and work of White see Southgate B. C., “Covetous of Truth”: *The Life and Work of Thomas White, 1593-1676* (Dordrecht: 1993). See also Henry J., “Atomism and Eschatology: Catholicism and Natural Philosophy in the Interregnum”, *British Journal for the History of Science* 15 (1982) 211-39.

Jenks (1656?-1714), commented that he would rather be recording that Sergeant's 'faction had been dead'². It is possible that Jenks knew something that we do not, but as far as we can now tell, the death of Sergeant did mark the demise of the Blackloist faction. Certainly, Sergeant was the last public spokesman for Blackloism, or, as one contemporary referred to it, the 'haeresum Blackloi et Sargentii'³.

The Sergeant I want to concentrate on here, however, is the one who has been described as an all but 'forgotten critic of Descartes and Locke'. Descartes was long dead by the time Sergeant began to publish his attacks on the way modern philosophy was proceeding, but Sergeant lumped him and his followers in with John Locke (1632-1704) as what he called 'ideists'. Sergeant's criticisms of Locke are not routinely discussed in historical accounts of Locke's philosophy; after all, Locke himself never felt the need to respond to Sergeant in print, he merely made marginal comments in his copies of the two books where Sergeant attacked his 'ideism', Sergeant's *Method to Science* of 1696 and

² Sylvester Jenks, Letter Book, British Library, Additional MS 29612, f. 60. The main works on Sergeant are: Krook D., *John Sergeant and His Circle: A Study of Three Seventeenth-Century English Aristotelians* (Leiden: 1993); and Hay M. V., *The Jesuits and the Popish Plot* (London: 1934); and Southgate B. C., "'Beating down Scepticism': The Solid Philosophy of John Sergeant, 1623-1707", in Stewart M. A. (ed.), *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford: 2000) 281-315.

³ Lominus M. [Talbot P.], *Blackloanae Haeresis olim in Pelagio et Manichaeis damnatae nunc denovo renascentis, Historia et Confutatio* (Ghent: 1675). On Sergeant's affiliation with Blackloism see Southgate, "Beating down Scepticism", 283-88.

his *Solid Philosophy Asserted* of 1697.⁴ When historians of philosophy have taken the trouble to pay detailed attention to Sergeant's criticisms, however, they have, with one recent exception, completely failed to understand his concerns, and have missed what Sergeant was trying to do. Accordingly, these historians have dismissed Sergeant simply as a representative of traditional non-modern ways of thinking, and as a man who was simply incapable of grasping the new 'modern' elements in Locke's philosophy. For John Yolton, for example, the value of Locke's marginal notes to Sergeant's *Solid Philosophy* was in showing that Locke's analysis of knowledge, unlike the traditional scholastic approach of Sergeant, 'set the scene for a new approach to these problems', and constituted a 'landmark in the field of epistemology'.⁵ Similarly, Pauline Phemister has seen Sergeant as merely reasserting his allegiance to Aristotle, while Locke 'had his eye fixed firmly on the future', and so 'their disagreements bear out the classification of Locke as a modern'.⁶

Part of the problem with Yolton's and Phemister's accounts is that they are all too happy to use Sergeant's obvious allegiance to scholastic Aristotelianism as a way of pointing to, and pointing up, Locke's modernism. It never occurs to them to ask *why* Sergeant might

⁴ Sergeant, J., *The Method to Science* (London: 1696). Sergeant, J., *Solid Philosophy Asserted against the Fancies of the Ideists: Or, the Method of Science farther Illustrated. With Reflexions on Mr. Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (London: 1697).

⁵ Yolton J. W., "Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951) 528-559, at 559.

⁶ Phemister P., "Locke and Sergeant on Scientific Method", in Sorell T. (ed.), *The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: 1993) 231-249, at 231 and 249.

still have been defending Aristotelianism in the late 1690s, long after the lessons of Descartes, long after the cumulative impact of the works of the fellows of the Royal Society, and almost a decade after the publication of Newton's *Principia*. Their assumption seems to be that Sergeant's Aristotelianism does not need to be explained: that he is, or was, simply representative of the still lingering influence of Aristotle among minor thinkers.

In fact, this merely shows that they have not paid sufficient attention to Sergeant's own concerns. If we wish to correct this, as good a starting point as any is to note the fact that Locke's *Essay* (1690) clearly drew Sergeant the controversialist into a new area of dispute. Sergeant's earlier disputes, against the Anglican divines already mentioned, Bramhall, Hammond, Stillingfleet, and so on, were all chiefly concerned with the so-called 'rule of faith' controversy, and so it was a new departure for him to enter into epistemology with his attack on the 'ideism', as he called it, which was represented by both Descartes and Locke.⁷ This shift in Sergeant's focus has recently been discussed by the one exception among historians of philosophy who has taken the trouble to assess Sergeant on his own terms, rather than as someone who supposedly failed to understand Locke. According to Dmitri Levitin, Sergeant saw 'the Way of Ideas' as leading to deism and even atheism, and seeing the inroads this new style of philosophizing was making into the English universities, he made an effort to put a stop to it.⁸

⁷ I am aware, of course, that I am using the word 'epistemology' anachronistically here—I hope this can be forgiven on the grounds that what I am discussing would now be designated as epistemology.

⁸ Levitin D., "Reconsidering John Sergeant's Attacks on Locke's *Essay*", *Intellectual History Review* 20 (2010) 457-77. Levitin is exceptional in taking Sergeant seriously only among those who have considered

In what follows I do not dissent from Levitin's argument, but I want to bring out a continuity between Sergeant's earlier 'Rule of Faith' polemics and his attacks on Descartes and Locke. It seems clear that in Sergeant's mind the theological rule of faith and issues of epistemology—that is to say, how we establish reliable knowledge—were not unconnected. Indeed, it was his lifelong concern to establish the truth of the Catholic position on the rule of faith which drew him into his attack on 'ideist' epistemology.

Who was John Sergeant?

Before looking further into this, it is important to familiarize ourselves, a little at least, with Sergeant himself. Sergeant was a convert to Catholicism. After graduation from St John's College, Cambridge, in 1643, he became secretary to the Bishop of Durham, Thomas Morton (1564-1659), but later in that same year he changed from the Anglican to the Roman communion. In an autobiographical account written in his later years, Sergeant claims that he converted as a result of 'searching into the records of antiquity', whereupon he came to the conclusion that the claims of Catholic tradition were correct. But he also mentions that he was converted by Christopher Davenport (1598-1680), a former student and then colleague of Thomas White's at the English College in Douai. Davenport was the author of *Deus, Natura, Gratia*, an ecumenical work which tried to suggest that there were no significant dogmas separating Anglicans and Catholics. White

his critique of Locke; Krook, *John Sergeant and His Circle*, and especially Southgate, "Beating down Scepticism" have also assessed Sergeant on his own terms.

had written a commendatory preface to the work.⁹ It seems very likely, therefore, that Sergeant's first introduction to Catholicism was highly coloured by Blackloism. He then went straight to the English College in Lisbon, where White had been second President of the College (1630-33), and which could still be regarded as something of a Blackloist forcing house, or if that is too strong, as a college heavily imbued with Jansenist ideas.¹⁰ Sergeant stayed at the college for twelve years before returning to England in 1655. He was immediately appointed Canon of the Chapter, and shortly after became its Secretary, continuing in that post until 1667, by which time, no doubt, his Blackloism made him seem no longer suitable.

There can be no doubt of Sergeant's commitment to the fundamental pillars of Blackloism: unbroken Catholic tradition as the rule of faith, and a supposedly rigorous

⁹ Sergeant left an important autobiographical source in the form of a letter to the Duke of Perth written in 1700. This has been published as Sergeant J., "The Literary Life of the Reverend John Sergeant", in *Catholicon*, vols 2 and 3 (London, 1816), on his conversion see vol. 3, p. 10. Franciscus a Sancta Clara [Davenport C.], *Deus, Natura, Gratia, sive tractatus de praedestinatione, de meritis & peccatorum remissione, seu de justificatione & denique de sanctorum in vocatione...* (Lyon: 1634). See Dockery J. B., *Christopher Davenport, Friar and Diplomat* (London: 1960).

¹⁰ Blackloism has been seen as an English version of Jansenism. See Duffy E., "The English Secular Clergy and the Counter-Reformation", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34 (1983) 214-30, pp. 219-22; and Bradley R. I., "Blacklo and the Counter-Reformation: An Inquiry into the Strange Death of Catholic England", in Carter C. H. (ed.), *From the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation: Essays in Honour of Garrett Mattingley* (London: 1966) 348-70, at 359-63.

Aristotelianism.¹¹ These two principles are the essential themes of all his published works. But it is much more difficult to be sure of Sergeant's line on the doctrinal details of Blackloism. Sergeant's published works concentrate upon trying to establish the validity, and indeed the infallibility, of tradition as a rule of faith, but he seldom discusses particular aspects of the tradition, such as the doctrine of Purgatory, the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, infants receiving the Eucharist, or transubstantiation. It seems safe to assume that he would have been opposed to Papal infallibility, since that does seem to contradict the consensual nature of tradition, but again there is nothing explicit about this in Sergeant's writings. As to the other doctrinal details of Blackloism, however, it is difficult to be sure whether Sergeant fully accepted them.

It is not hard to surmise why Sergeant might have preferred to remain silent about doctrinal details, however. White had already received his first censure from the Holy Office in 1655 when Sergeant first embarked upon his own publishing career. It may simply have been, therefore, that Sergeant knew that he could avoid censure by refusing to descend to what he took to be the detailed doctrinal implications of a close study of early Catholic tradition tightly coupled with a philosophical theology. Certainly, if this was a deliberate strategy on Sergeant's part, it worked well. In spite of some threatening machinations by his enemies, Sergeant's works were never censured by his Church. When Peter Talbot, Archbishop of Dublin (1620-1680), tried to have Sergeant censured by publishing an account of his and White's alleged heresies, for example, the case never

¹¹ See Southgate B. C., "White's Disciple: John Sergeant and Blackloism", *Recusant History* 24 (1998) 431-36; and Levitin, "Reconsidering John Sergeant's Attacks", especially 460-61. On the main tenets of Blackloism, see Southgate, *Covetous of Truth*, and Henry, "Atomism and Eschatology".

even reached Rome, having been rejected by a group of doctors at the Sorbonne, to whom the case was first submitted.¹² In a subsequent, unpublished account of Sergeant's theology, Talbot accused him of denying the divinity of Christ, but again this was a charge that, quite rightly, did not stick.¹³

If Sergeant was reluctant to be explicit in his defense of White, contemporaries made no distinction between his beliefs and Blackloism. When Tillotson responded to Sergeant in his *Rule of Faith*, he frequently referred to White's ideas as though they were interchangeable with Sergeant's. Peter Talbot said that Sergeant was always regarded as 'the famous Blackloist', and insisted that the heresy of Blacklo was also 'haeresum Sergentii', even if the doctors of the Sorbonne preferred to give Sergeant the benefit of the doubt.¹⁴

¹² M. Lominus [Peter Talbot], *Blackloanae Haeresis*. See Krook, *John Sergeant and His Circle*, xxi, and 163-4; and Hay, *Jesuits and the Popish Plot*, 21-9. For Sergeant's own account of his examination by the Sorbonne see Sergeant J., *Raillery Defeated by Calm Reason* (London: 1699).

¹³ Lominus M. [Talbot P.], "A Briefe Account of John Sergeant the famous Blackloist his letter threatening to accuse Peter Talbot of treason in case he should publish anything against Sergeant's printed booke wherein he maintains that Christian faith is not divine and by consequence must say that Christ is not God", Bodleian Library, Carte Papers, vol. 38, f. 734. See Hay, *Jesuits and the Popish Plot*, 183-9, where it is argued that Sergeant did indeed accuse Talbot of treason, implicating him as one of the chief conspirators in the Popish Plot.

¹⁴ Tillotson J., *The Rule of Faith. Or an Answer to the Treatise of Mr. I. S. entitled Sure-Footing, &c. 4th edition*; in *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr John Tillotson* (London: 1696), (for example) 682, 683, 762; Lominus [Talbot], *Blackloanae Haeresis*; see Krook, *John Sergeant and His Circle*, p. xxi, 165, 166.

There is little to suggest, however, that Sergeant himself was ever accorded anything like the same kind of respect as White himself. In all my reading I have only discovered four writers who praise Sergeant's abilities: Sergeant himself, and then three twentieth-century historians of English Catholicism: M. V. Hay, George Tavard, and Dorothea Krook.¹⁵ Those eminent divines who take issue with Sergeant, such as Henry Hammond (1605-1660), Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699), and John Tillotson do not seem to regard him with the esteem accorded to White. On the contrary, they seem to regard it necessary to answer him, only in case silence is taken for acquiescence. Although Locke took the trouble to read through Sergeant's *Method to Science* and *Solid Philosophy Asserted*, and made substantial marginal comments in both, he evidently never thought it necessary to answer Sergeant in print, or even in a private letter.¹⁶ Sergeant seems to have been regarded, therefore, as an irritation, not as a force to be reckoned with. By the time that he died, even if it was 'with a pen in his hand', Blackloism had long been a spent force, and Sergeant himself was scarcely regarded.¹⁷

The Rule of Faith

¹⁵ Hay, *Jesuits and the Popish Plot*, 14-16; Krook, *John Sergeant and His Circle*, *passim*. Tavard G. H., *The Seventeenth-Century Tradition: A Study in Recusant Thought* (Leiden: 1978), 219-45. For Sergeant's praise of himself see Hay, *Jesuits and the Popish Plot*, 16-18, where he quotes from Sergeant's "Literary Life".

¹⁶ See Yolton, "Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant"; and Bradish N. C., "John Sergeant, A Forgotten Critic of Descartes and Locke", *The Monist*, 39 (1929) 571-628.

¹⁷ Dodd C., *The Church History of England*, 3 vols (Brussels: 1737-1742) I, 472.

Like his mentor, Thomas White, Sergeant was convinced that the Protestant rule of faith in Scripture alone was completely unworkable, and that only the Roman Catholic rule of faith could lead to the true religion.

The unworkability of the Protestant rule of faith is shown, according to Sergeant, by the undeniable fact that there are many different sects of Protestants, who differ on their interpretation of the Bible, and yet who all claim Scripture alone as their rule of faith. The issue is nicely brought out in the first of Sergeant's *Five Catholick Letters* (1687), the letter to Edward Stillingfleet. Sergeant asks Stillingfleet:

In these words of yours (p. 7) [*As to the Rule of **our** Faith*] give me leave to reflect on the word [*OUR,*] and thence to ask you, Who are YOU?... Are you a Socinian, an Arian, a Sabellian, a Eutychian, &c. or what are you? Are you a whole, or a half, or a Quarter-nine-and-thirty-Article man? Do you take them for Snares or Fences, and when for the one and when for the other, and wherefore? These words [*The Rule of OUR Faith*] make you all these at once; for all these profess unanimously Scripture's Letter is their Rule of Faith.¹⁸

¹⁸ Sergeant J., *Five Catholick Letters* (London: 1688). I have used the first edition of the letter: Sergeant J., *A Letter to the D[ean] of [St.] P[aul's] in Answer to the Arguing Part of His First Letter to Mr [Thomas] G[odden]* (London: 1687), 25. The quotations from Stillingfleet in the passage are presented as in the original, so the square-bracketed material is in Sergeant's original. See Stillingfleet E., *An Answer to Several Late Treatises* (London: 1688).

As Sergeant points out a little later, ‘even the word Protestant too is a Subaltern Genus, and has divers Species, and ’tis doubted by many, who are no Papists, under which Species you are to be rankt.’¹⁹

Sergeant uses the obvious disunity of the Protestant churches, therefore, as a way of showing that Scripture alone, as interpreted by each and every communicant in the ‘priesthood of all believers’, could only lead to an atomisation of opinion, and could never lead to infallible truth. ‘Those Principles of yours,’ Sergeant wrote to the Dean of St Paul’s, ‘which you take up for a shew, when you write against Catholics, would, if put in practice, in a short time crumble to Atoms all the Churches in the World?’²⁰

The Catholic rule of faith, by contrast, did lead to infallible truth, Sergeant claimed. In this he was taking an entirely standard line in Catholic orthodoxy. Divine revelation, according to the Catholic Church, is contained in the written books and the unwritten traditions of the Church which make plain what the written words mean. The Catholic rule of faith is nicely outlined by another leading Blackloist, Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665), in his *Conference with a Lady about Choice of Religion* (1638):

The substance of all which may be summed up and reduced to this following short question; namely, whether in the election of the faith whereby you hope to be saved, you will be guided by the unanimous consent of the wisest, the learnedest

¹⁹ Stillingfleet, *Answer to Several Late Treatises*, 25-6. For more on the dispute between Sergeant and Stillingfleet, and the rule of faith controversy, see Southgate B. C., “‘The Fighting of Two Cocks on a Dung-Hill’: Stillingfleet versus Sergeant”, in Coudert A. P, Hutton S., Popkin R. H., and Weiner G. M. (eds), *Judaean-Christian Intellectual Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (Dordrecht: 1999) 225-35.

²⁰ Sergeant J., *A Letter to the D[ean] of [St] P[aul’s]*, 27-8.

and the piousest men of the whole world, that have been instructed in what they believe by men of the like quality living in the age before them, and soe from age to age untill the Apostles and Christ: and that in this manner have derived from that fountayne, both a perfect and full knowledge of all...²¹

The unbroken tradition of the Catholic Church from Christ and the Apostles guarantees the truth of the Roman religion. As Thomas White himself put it, 'if we look into the immediate progress and joints of the descent we cannot find where it can misse'.²²

Now, needless to say, it was easy for Protestants to point to the all too obvious places where Catholic tradition did seem to have gone drastically wrong. It was especially easy given that White had been charged with heresy by his mother Church. As John Tillotson (1630-1694) somewhat facetiously pointed out,

The Pope and Mr White, notwithstanding the plainness of oral Tradition, and the impossibility of being ignorant of it, or mistaking it, have yet been so unhappy as to differ about several points of Faith; insomuch that Mr White is unkindly censured for it at Rome, and perhaps here in England the Pope speeds no better; however, the difference continues so wide, that Mr White hath thought it fit to disobey the summons of his chief Pastor, and like a prudent Man, rather to write against him here out of harms-way, than to venture the infallibility of plain oral

²¹ Digby Sir K., *Conference with a Lady about Choice of Religion* (Paris: 1638), pp. 109-10.

²² White T., *An answer to the Lord Faulklands discourse of infallibility* (London: 1660), 4. This work was written before 1637.

Tradition for the Doctrines he maintains against a practical Tradition which they have at Rome of killing Hereticks.²³

But we needn't pursue this argument here. The important thing for our purposes, as should be evident, is that the Catholic rule of faith seems to demand that knowledge is based in consensus, not on the internal mental processes and conclusions of the individual mind. The consensus was not necessarily held to be among the whole, or even the majority; Sergeant was not concerned about the democratic intellect but only about how certain truths could be established. Just as the rule of faith depended upon the apostles who had first heard and spoken with Christ and then the leaders of the Christian community who had heard the Apostles, and the Early Fathers who had heard them, and those who heard the Early Fathers, through to all the Church Councils presided over by successive Popes, so our knowledge of the world depended upon appropriate expert testimony. In the case of logic, for example,

Terms of Art are made by Men of Art, who are Reflecters, and not directly imprinted by Nature, or Common to all Mankind: For which Reason we must learn the Meaning of those Words, and, consequently, those Notions themselves, from Learned Men, and not from the Generality.

But even in the case of everyday matters of observed fact, 'this is call'd Evidence,' Sergeant wrote, 'because, tho' it be a Rude knowledge, yet it is a True one; and 'tis the Work of Learned Men to Polish by Art those rough Drafts of Evidence which the Vulgar

²³ Tillotson, *The Rule of Faith*, 665-779, 684. White was censured by the Holy Office in 1655, 1657, 1661 and 1663. See Bradley, "Blacklo and the Counter-Reformation", 363.

have by a Natural Way'.²⁴ What Sergeant seems to have in mind is an everyday equivalent of the famous claim of Thomas Sprat, in his *History of the Royal Society of London* (1667), that when an experiment has been performed by a small group of demonstrators in front of the Society, it is the duty of the Assembly as a whole to judge of the matter of fact demonstrated by this experiment.²⁵

Learned men are also required, Sergeant insists, to provide definitions of things and of terms of Art, which are 'such necessary Instruments to true and solid Science', so much so, in fact, that Sergeant says he 'could wish for the Improvement of Knowledge, that our Universities would appoint a Committee of Learned Men to compile a Dictionary of Definitions for the Notions we use in all parts of Philosophy whatever.'²⁶

Sergeant recognised that the epistemologies of both Descartes and Locke were in danger of making nonsense of the Roman Catholic concept of infallible knowledge as a consensus of many minds, and it is for that reason that he turned away from explicit discussions of the rule of faith, and entered into debates about epistemology. It also explains why, as far as Sergeant was concerned, Descartes and Locke could be lumped together as 'ideists', even though from our point of view these two founders of modern philosophy have radically opposed epistemologies. Sergeant was not interested in distinctions between rationalism and empiricism, but only in the fact that both thinkers

²⁴ Sergeant, *Method to Science*, 48.

²⁵ Sprat, T., *The History of the Royal-Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge* (London: 1667), Section XVII, 99-100.

²⁶ Sergeant, *Method to Science*, sig. [d3]r.

saw knowledge as the preserve and privilege of the individual, and therefore of the private mind.²⁷

It is true, as Yolton and Phemister have pointed out, that Sergeant's response to Locke's empiricist epistemology, the so-called 'notional way', owes a great deal to scholastic Aristotelianism. What's more, many of the original features of the notional way, which cannot be found in Aristotle, are nevertheless attributed to him. But this is not simply because Sergeant is a benighted thinker, unaware of recent developments in natural philosophy, and incapable of escaping the Medieval mind-set which saw Aristotle as the master of those who know.

Sergeant was obliged by his commitment to the importance, and the infallibility, of Roman Catholic tradition to continue to uphold Aristotelianism. To reject Aristotelianism would be to reject a major aspect of the tradition of his Church.²⁸ And besides, continued adherence to Aristotle seemed reasonable on philosophical, not just theological, grounds. After all, philosophy since the Renaissance had been in a more atomised state than Protestant religion, and it was impossible to decide between all the rival philosophical systems merely on rational grounds. As Sergeant pointed out:

²⁷ Locke is lumped together with the Cartesians, as just another follower of the 'way of ideas' in the Preface of Sergeant's *Solid Philosophy*, especially sig. a2r-a3r. See also Levitin, "Reconsidering John Sergeant's Attacks", 463 and 471.

²⁸ In this, Sergeant was once again following his mentor, Thomas White. See Henry, "Atomism and Eschatology", and Henry, J., "Sir Kenelm Digby, Recusant Philosopher", in Rogers G. A. J., Sorrell T., and Kraye J. (eds), *Insiders and Outsiders in the Seventeenth Century* (London and New York: 2009) 43-75.

Reason being Man's Nature, and the Proper Act of Reason, the Deducing Evidently New Knowledges out of Antecedent ones, it may seem Wonderful that Mankind, after the using their Reason and Disputing so long time, should still Disagree in their Sentiments, and contradict one another in inferring their Conclusions.²⁹

It seemed necessary once again to revert to the expert testimony of past ages to decide between them. On these grounds, even excluding the Thomistic tradition of the Church and looking simply at the history of philosophy from a secular point of view, Aristotle seemed to carry the day.

Communitarian Epistemology or Private Thoughts?

I'll come back to a brief account of the Blackloist 'notional way' in philosophy shortly, but first, let me just indicate Sergeant's concern to reject the epistemology of the private mind in favour of a consensual or communitarian epistemology. One of the ways in which this manifests itself in Sergeant's philosophy, as it was to do in the twentieth century following Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (but for Sergeant was in keeping with Aristotle's views), is with a concern for 'ordinary language':

Mankind has now for some thousands of years held conversations with one another, yet it was never observ'd that they could not understand one anothers meaning in discourse about Natural Objects; or if any hap'd to occur which was Ambiguous, that they could not make their Notions known by explications; or if there had been some notable variation in their Notions... the Mistake can easily

²⁹ Sergeant, *Method to Science*, sig. ar.

be made manifest and corrected by the standard of the Generality of Mankind, who assure them of their Misapprehension; and of Learned Men particularly, who find the Cause of their Mistake...³⁰

Similarly, a little later in the same work:

the only way to acquire solid Knowledge of the Nature of Things, or (which is the same) of those Nature-imprinted Notions, is, not to frame high-flying speculations of them, beaten out of our own Brain, or coin'd by our own Wit: but, to gain by attentive Reflexion, the true and genuine Meaning of those Words, which the Generality of Mankind, or the Vulgar, make use of to signifie those Notions: For, this known, the Meaning of the Word being the Meaning or Notion of those that use it, and their Notion being the Nature of the Thing, it follows, that the Nature of the Thing will be known likewise.³¹

Elsewhere the emphasis is upon how matters of fact, rather than the meaning of terms, are known by collective agreement:

Nay, the best Philosophers (as will be seen hereafter) must learn from their Sayings how to make their Definitions of all such Natural Notions. Thus they know Evidently (tho' Naturally) the force of Witnessing Authority, when 'tis Universal, and of Sensible Matters of Fact: For example, They know there was

³⁰ Sergeant, *Method to Science*, 7. See also Southgate, "Beating down Scepticism", 300-02. For Wittgenstein's highly influential discussion of 'ordinary language', see Wittgenstein L., *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1968), §243 et sqq.

³¹ Sergeant, *Method to Science*, 38.

such a one as Queen Elizabeth, or the Long Civil War in England, for, they know Men could not be deceiv'd themselves in knowing such things, and that they could not All universally conspire to deceive their Children in attesting such a Falshood; or, if they had a mind to it, they know that the Cheat must have been discover'd by some among so many thousands.³²

But Sergeant also tries the more negative line of denying the validity of the ideist approach with its emphasis upon the solipsistic mind. Descartes's *Ego Cogito*, for example, is dismissed in the *Method to Science* as just another of the many 'Whimseys coyn'd in the Mint of our own Mind', and Descartes's Method brings 'a kind of Enthusiasm into Philosophy'. Indeed, in *Solid Philosophy Asserted* Sergeant reminds his readers that Descartes himself presented three dreams which he had on the night of November 10 1619 as the 'Foundation' of his method. As far as Sergeant is concerned this simply shows that Descartes was 'stark mad':

Now, Gentlemen, I beseech you, tell me, in good Sober Sadness; Can you think GOD ever intended that the onely Method for Men to get Knowledge, should be to lose their Wits first in looking after it? That to Unman our selves, so as to seem Crack'd-Brain'd, or Drunk, is the Way to become Soberly Rational? That, to reduce ourselves to perfect Ignorance of all that the Goodness of Nature has

³² Sergeant, *Method to Science*, 148

taught us, (which is, in plain Terms, to make an Ass of one's self) is the onely Certain Way to become a Philosopher?³³

Similarly, using Malebranche as a chief representative of the 'Cartesian Doctrine', because of his 'peculiar Talent of talking nonsense as prettily and plausibly as any Man I ever read', Sergeant points out that, according to Malebranche, 'all Science... comes by Divine Revelation'. But this is tantamount to Enthusiasm:

To what end then are Teachers, Professours, Schools and Universities, if, when we have done what we can by all our Teaching and Learning, nothing but Divine Revelation must do the business, or gain us any Science. But now he advances to a higher point. The Mind (says he) is immediately, and after a very strict manner, United to God... by this new Philosophy, every Human Mind is United Essentially to God, that is to the Godhead it self... Was ever such Quakerism heard of among Philosophers! Or, plain honest Human Reason so subtiliz'd and exhal'd into Mystick Theology, by Spiritual Alchemy!³⁴

Crazy as all this sounds, Sergeant insists that it is what the ideists proclaim:

³³ Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, Preface, sig. b2v. On Descartes's three dreams, see, for example, Gaukroger S., *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: 1995) 105-11. Sergeant was not alone among British thinkers in believing Descartes to be mad; see Henry J., "The Reception of Cartesianism", in Anstey P. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: 2012), in press.

³⁴ Sergeant, *Method to Science*, Preface, sig. [d]r-[d]v. On Malebranche, see, for example, Radner D., *Malebranche: A Study of a Cartesian System* (Assen: 1978).

Yet, to say True, this is very Consonant to the Doctrine of *Ideas*. They slight the Instruction of Nature, they scorn to be beholding to their Senses, and Outward Objects; which forces them upon *Introversion*, and to observe (as their same Authour [Malebranche] says) what Eternal Truth tells us in the Recesses of our Reason; that is, in their Darling *Ideas*.

The Cartesian Method, he concludes, is nothing more than a 'piece of Wit'.³⁵

Although Sergeant is less polemical in tone in dealing with Locke's philosophy, he nevertheless sees him as having 'introduced a kind of Fanaticism into Philosophy' by his 'Introversion upon these unsolid Aiery Bubbles', by which Sergeant means Locke's 'Imaginary and Visionary *Ideas*'. If Locke is right, then 'all Philosophical Knowledge... [is] rendred impossible.'³⁶

The Notional Way

In his article on 'Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant', John Yolton seemed to be somewhat baffled by Sergeant's philosophy. He even suggests at one point that 'it is hard to understand how Sergeant could have misinterpreted Locke'. In two places he seems to see the crucial difference between him and Locke, but fails to realise its significance. At one point he says that Locke's method of gaining knowledge was 'too far removed from the reality of things, too indirect, and too private for Sergeant', but he

³⁵ Sergeant, *Method to Science*, sig. [d]v, and sig. [d4]v.

³⁶ Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, Epistle Dedicatory, sig. A4v-A5r.

does not go on to discuss Sergeant's objections to private knowledge.³⁷ Again Yolton notices that Sergeant recognizes two ways in which things are invested with 'meaning', and that the second of these is concerned with how meanings are 'inherited and passed on or refined through usage'; Yolton even coins a descriptive phrase for this, he calls it the 'ethnological genesis' of meaning. Unfortunately, in the following discussion Yolton focuses on what he takes (mistakenly in my view) to be the first way that things are engendered with meaning, in which meanings are given to the mind directly by external objects.³⁸

Putting it simply, Sergeant seeks to replace Lockean Ideas, which as we all know are either sense data or internal mental reflexions upon those data,³⁹ with what he calls 'notions'. Again, stating it simply, notions constitute the mental furniture of our minds, but they themselves are more complex than Lockean ideas because they are mental phenomena based on the interpretation of sense data by our reason in order to fit them into the whole scheme of things of which we are a part, or, in short, in order to give them meaning. Notions, then, are not just things in our minds, but are things in our understanding. Although reason plays a major role, the imposition of meaning onto sense data, in order to turn them into notions in the understanding, would be impossible without

³⁷ Yolton, "Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant", 544, 541; see also 539.

³⁸ Yolton, "Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant", 549. Perhaps, if Yolton had been writing today, instead of the 'ethnological genesis' of meaning, he might have used Martin Kusch's expression "communitarian epistemology." See Kusch, M., *Knowledge by Agreement: The Programme of Communitarian Epistemology* (Oxford: 2002).

³⁹ Locke, J. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: 1690), II, 1, §2.

a socially acquired repertoire of what Sergeant calls *praecognita* or *praeconcessa*, or things foreknown or foregranted. So, if I receive a particular kind of sense datum, which is strictly speaking nothing more than a rhomboid patch of colour, I can recognise it as a book, if and only if, I know what books are. Furthermore, if I know that books are rectangular, to see a rhomboid shape as a book I will also need to have been familiarised with notions of space, distance, perspective distortion, and so on. But this foreknowledge is not innate, according to Sergeant,

Knowledge may be consider'd as instill'd by insensible degrees into Infants, or the Ruder Sort; or, as Reducible to the Clearest Grounds by Men of Art.⁴⁰

Assuming the acceptability of our notions has been confirmed by our own life experiences, analogous with the general process we considered earlier, in ‘conversations with one another’, and correcting mistakes “by the standard of the Generality of Mankind,... and of Learned Men particularly...”, we can be reasonably confident about the certainty of our knowledge. So, if our notions do conform to the notions of the generality of mankind, then we can be assured of their truth, in much the same way that the doctrines of the faith can be seen to be true because they derive from an unbroken line of teachers from the days of the Apostles themselves, and not because an individual believer has read the Bible for himself in an idiosyncratic way.

If we hope to understand Sergeant, therefore, and the reasons for his radical disagreement with Locke, we must understand the historical context from which his epistemology

⁴⁰ Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, 363

emerged. It seems clear that even Locke was largely unaware of the Catholic tradition upon which Sergeant's epistemology was grounded. At one point in the margin of his copy of Sergeant's *Solid Philosophy* he wrote: 'J. S. speaks everywhere as if Truth and Science had personally appeared to him and by word of mouth actually commissioned him to be their sole defender and propagator.'⁴¹ But for Sergeant Truth and Science do not suddenly appear to individual persons—they are acquired by each individual by word of mouth, passed on from generation to generation. Locke's inability to see the point of Sergeant's collectivist epistemology is clearly visible also in a later marginal comment. At the point where Sergeant insists that 'it is impossible we can make an Ordinary, much less any Speculative, Discourse, but the Discourers must agree in something that is either Foreknown, or (at least) Foregranted...', Locke underlined the word 'discourse'. To the side, Locke wrote: 'he means disputants, but Mr. L speaks not of disputations but of knowledge.'⁴² Sergeant's 'discourse' was not necessarily between disputants, but between teacher and pupil, or expert and layman, parent and child, or indeed any similar social interaction, and his point was that knowledge was acquired through the discourse (which had to be based on something foreknown, such as a common language, fundamental assumptions, etc.). For Locke, however, our knowledge could only be understood as an individual psychological phenomenon, and his conviction blinded him

⁴¹ This copy of Sergeant's *Solid Philosophy* is now in the library of St John's College, Cambridge (Classmark: Aa.2.27). This note appears on p. 239. See also Yolton, "Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant", 542.

⁴² Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, 368-69. Sergeant does mention 'Disputants' a little later, but it is clear he is simply using the word interchangeably with 'Discourers'. Locke's note appears on p. 368 of his copy; see also Yolton, "Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant", 544.

to the clear difference between discourse and disputation; as far as Locke was concerned, if Sergeant spoke of discourse, he could only have meant disputation. Locke believed Sergeant had missed the point—but it was Locke who had missed Sergeant's. As Dmitri Levitin has recently pointed out, Locke responded to Sergeant with 'incredulous incomprehension.'⁴³

This can also be seen in Locke's failure to understand the difference between his own 'ideas' and Sergeant's 'notions'. 'J. S. has proved *Ideas* to be *Notions*,' Locke wrote in a margin, 'why then so much quarrel about the name.'⁴⁴ But notwithstanding Locke's acknowledgement that the human mind started off as a *tabula rasa* and only acquired its furniture of ideas as a result of experience, the process seemed to Sergeant to be too private, too solipsistic, to be workable. Notions differed from Ideas, crucially, because they were acquired through a process of socialization. One of the 'chief points' which Sergeant said he tried to get across to Locke in his *Solid Philosophy* was 'That we know the most common notions most easily, and individuals least of all.'⁴⁵ Sergeant's epistemology of 'common notions' was a 'communitarian epistemology'. But Locke never saw the point. As he wrote to his friend Molyneux: 'I do not wonder at the confusedness of Sergeant's notions, or that they should be unintelligible to me... I expect nothing from Mr. Sergeant but what is abstruse in the highest degree.'⁴⁶

⁴³ Levitin, "Reconsidering John Sergeant's Attacks", 476.

⁴⁴ At Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, 37.

⁴⁵ Sergeant, "Literary Life", vol. 3, 122.

⁴⁶ I rely for this quotation upon Bradish, *John Sergeant*, 13.

Similarly, when Sergeant objects to the claim of the ‘ideists’ that clear and distinct ideas can be recognised as a result of ‘the fresh, fair, and lively appearances they make to the Fancy’, Locke fails to see any merit in Sergeant’s alternative. For Sergeant ‘only the definition, by explicating the true essence of a thing, shews us distinctly the true spiritual notion of it.’⁴⁷ Certainty emerges, therefore, from explication, which ultimately allows us to recognise the fundamental nature of the ‘notion’ in question, and to arrive at an agreed definition of it. But this is by no means an arbitrary process, much less an artificially contrived one: the definitions can only be established by consensus over indefinite periods of discourse. Sergeant is simply trying to indicate how a supposedly ‘clear and distinct idea’ can in fact derive, *not* from an individual psychological event, but from the force of the collective consciousness imposing it upon all members of the collective. Locke, failing to see any of this, simply alights on the word ‘definition’: ‘Where are those definitions that explicate the true essence of things? And (excepting mathematical) how many of them has J.S.? He would oblige the world by a list of them...’⁴⁸

Socio-political Starting Points and Different Kinds of Epistemology

By the 1670s, when Locke began to write the first draft of the *Essay*, religious dissent and factionalism of the kind that had earlier led to the Civil War was increasing once again. According to a note by James Tyrrell, a close friend of Locke’s, it was towards the end of 1670 that Locke and a group of friends met to explore questions of ‘morality and

⁴⁷ Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, 372.

⁴⁸ In Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, 372; see also Yolton, “Locke’s Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant”, 545.

revealed religion'.⁴⁹ The pragmatic issue exercising this group of friends was how to unite the dissenting factions; Locke advocated tolerance of different points of view, on the grounds that the essential fundamentals of the faith are few and agreed by all, and all other details are matters of indifference to one's salvation. As Locke himself wrote in an early manuscript on toleration, there should be a universal right to 'pure speculative opinions, as the belief of the Trinity, purgatory, transubstantiation, antipodes, Christ's personal reign on Earth, etc.' because, as they are speculative, they do not threaten the state or the way of life of one's neighbours. Locke went on from here to begin to develop epistemological principles which he saw as supporting the case for tolerance. The first of these principles was what he saw as the compulsion of belief; by which Locke meant that it is impossible for someone to apprehend things otherwise than they appear given his or her beliefs; in just the same way that the eye sees colours in the rainbow, 'whether those colours be really there or no'.⁵⁰ It followed from this that knowledge, for any given individual, was constituted of those things they were compelled to believe ('whether', Locke might have said, 'they were really true or no'). This requires toleration, Locke believed, rather than trying to change persons' beliefs. Locke's toleration was based on a generally skeptical view that we can never be sure, even in our own case, whether what

⁴⁹ The origin of the *Essay* in this conversation between friends is mentioned by Locke himself in the 'Epistle to the Reader'. On Tyrrell's indication of the subject matter see Rogers G. A. J., "The Intellectual Setting and Aims of the *Essay*", in Newman L. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"* (Cambridge: 2007) 7-32, 8.

⁵⁰ Locke J., "An Essay Concerning Toleration", in Locke J., *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, ed. Goldie M. (Indianapolis: 2010), 105-41, 106. The compulsion of belief was also taken up by Locke's follower, Matthew Tindal. See Levitin, "Reassessing John Sergeant's Attacks", 469.

we believe is really true or not (we cannot transcend the compulsion of our own beliefs). This being so, it is clearly immoral to try to enforce conformity to a belief that cannot be guaranteed to be true. We can add to these preconceptions the more general view among Locke's contemporaries that we cannot know what any given individual really thinks—we all know from our own inner experiences that what someone publicly professes and what they privately believe do not have to coincide. It should be clear that the concern here is with individual thinkers, and their 'private' thoughts. Locke's starting point—the politics of toleration—meant that he developed a theory of the mind, or the understanding, which emphasized its private, seemingly individualistic nature, and its inaccessibility to others.

A number of recent scholars, including John Rogers, Nicholas Jolley, Richard Ashcraft, Neal Wood and Nicholas Wolterstorff, have all argued for the role of Locke's practical concern with religious toleration in Restoration England as the starting point from which he developed his epistemology in the *Essay*.⁵¹ We need not pursue the details of this story here. For our purposes, I hope it is clear that, given Locke's starting point, given his concern with the compulsion of belief, and the impossibility of knowing what someone is really thinking, it was almost inevitable that he should develop an epistemology which

⁵¹ Rogers G. A. J., "The Intellectual Setting and Aims of the *Essay*"; Jolley N., "Locke on Faith and Reason", in Newman L. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"* (Cambridge: 2007) 436-55; Wolterstorff N., *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: 1996); Wolterstorff N. "Locke's Philosophy of Religion", in Chappell V. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: 1994) 172-98; and Wood N., *The Politics of Locke's Philosophy: A Social Study of 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding'*, (Berkeley: 1983).

took it for granted that knowledge, or the presumption of knowledge, is based in the psychology of the individual.

It is easy to see, by contrast, that Sergeant's starting point (essentially seeking to defend the Roman Catholic claims to a monopoly on truth because it is the only Church with a continuous, unbroken, tradition handed down from the Apostles, successively to each generation of true believers) led him to insist that epistemology is properly based in the social collective and its consensus.

Locke's assumptions clearly proved to be the most useful for subsequent developments in the history of philosophy, and his *Essay* is regarded as one of the most influential books in Western civilization. It would require another paper to fully explain why this was so, but it should already be obvious, even from the short account given here, that Sergeant's efforts to persuade English contemporaries of the importance of the supposedly unbroken tradition of Roman Catholicism was unlikely to be embraced by the majority—the Protestant majority—of English thinkers. Sergeant, like his fellow Blackloists always remained outside the mainstream of English philosophy.⁵² Locke's *Essay*, by contrast, tuned in not only with political attempts to overcome religious factionalism and introduce a workable system of toleration, but also with the traditional Christian dualism of body and soul, in which the mind, identified with the soul, was as much a private part of the

⁵² On this 'outsider' status, see Henry, "Sir Kenelm Digby, Recusant Philosopher".

individual as the body (or, given its inaccessibility to others, an even more private part of the person than the body).⁵³

Whatever the reasons, there is no denying that the history of epistemology since Locke has effectively been a history of individualistic epistemology. Until very recently, any attempt to regard knowledge as a consensual, or communitarian institution has been confined to sociologists who specialize in what is referred to as the sociology of knowledge. There are signs, however, that things are beginning to change. Certain sociologically-inclined interpretations of Wittgenstein's later philosophy have made philosophers pay greater attention to the possibility of a more collectivist epistemology.⁵⁴

⁵³ The split is not between Catholics and Protestants—Descartes's dualism in many respects echoed Christian doctrine that had been introduced by Neoplatonizing Early Fathers. Sergeant did not dissent from the dualistic view of body and soul; the point is, however, that in seeking to promote the truth of Roman Catholic tradition he chose not to discuss the mind as part of a dualistic entity, but concentrated on the nature of knowledge, and therefore truth. See also Levitin, "Reassessing John Sergeant's Attacks", 475, where he draws attention to similarities between the philosophical theologies of Sergeant and Stillingfleet. Locke, who had a completely different intellectual focus was happy to discuss human understanding as an aspect of the (individual) mind. For another important discussion of individualistic approaches to the mind, see Shapin S., "'The Mind is Its Own Place': Science and Solitude in Seventeenth-Century England", *Science in Context* 4 (1991) 191-218.

⁵⁴ The main works leading to this socialization of philosophy—all of which take their starting point from Wittgenstein—are Winch P., *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: 1958); Kripke S., *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, MA: 1982); Bloor D., *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge* (London: 1983); Kusch M., *Knowledge by Agreement*; and Kusch M., *A Sceptical Guide to Meaning and Rules: Defending Kripke's Wittgenstein* (Chesham: 2006).

Even John Searle, once a major representative of the Anglo-American empiricist tradition deriving from Locke, has turned his attention to *The Construction of Social Reality*.⁵⁵

The former chasm between philosophers and sociologists of knowledge shows some signs, therefore, of diminishing (even if it is still a long way from closing). It would be interesting to try to understand why philosophers, after centuries of resistance (or merely indifference), are moving closer towards what Martin Kusch has recently called ‘the programme of communitarian epistemology’.⁵⁶ Professional philosophers are extremely assiduous in protecting the boundaries of their discipline and have previously excluded sociological approaches to epistemology as beyond the pale. But the traditional, ultimately Lockean, approach to epistemology has been encroached upon in recent decades, first from psychology and more recently from what goes under the name of ‘cognitive science’.⁵⁷ Philosophers have lost territory in the subsequent re-drawing of disciplinary boundaries, and it is surely not just a coincidence (much less the result of an overwhelming philosophical revelation) that they are now trying to recover lost ground by colonising the sociology of knowledge. It is perhaps only a matter of time before philosophers will learn to embrace a more collectivist, consensual theory of knowledge.

Be that as it may, the fact that Locke could not understand the import of Sergeant’s claims about the nature of knowledge provides a useful historical case study in the

⁵⁵ Searle J. R., *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: 1995).

⁵⁶ Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement*.

⁵⁷ Again, Martin Kusch is a good guide here. See, for example, Kusch M., *Psychologism: A Case Study in the Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge* (London: 1995).

sociology of philosophical knowledge. Philosophers in the modern tradition have been blind to social epistemology until very recently. Even John Yolton, writing in the 1950s, failed to understand why Sergeant was so opposed to Locke's epistemology; Sergeant's points were as lost on him as they were on Locke. The fact is, our epistemologies, our theories as to what counts as knowledge, and therefore our ideas about what is true, as much as those developed in the early modern period, depend upon our social and political starting points; and if they change, they do so because those broader circumstances have also changed.

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